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Arrive Honolulu from Kahuku, Wailuku and Waianae—8:25 a. m., 5:31 p. m.
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† Ex. Sunday.
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The BLACK BAG

By Louis Joseph Vance

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(Continued)

At first he was conscious of an effect of disappointment. She was nobody that he knew, even by reputation. She was simply a young girl, barely out of her teens—if as old as that phrase would signify. He wondered what she had found in him to make her think him worth so long a study and looked again, more keenly curious.

With this second glance appreciation stirred the artistic side of his nature, that was already grown impatient of his fretted mood. The slender and girlish figure, posed with such absolute lack of intrusion against a screen of rose and gilt, moved him to critical admiration. The tinted glow of shaded candles caught glistening on the spun gold of her hair enhanced the fine pallor of her young shoulders.

In the sheer youth of her the realized more than in night else lay her chiefest charm. She could be little more than a child, indeed, if he were to judge her by the purity of her shadowed eyes and the absence of emotion in the calm and direct look which presently she turned upon him who sat wondering at the level, pencilled darkness of her brows.

At length, aware that she had surprised his interest, Kirkwood glanced aside coolly deliberate lest she should detect in his attitude anything more than impersonal approval.

A slow color burned his cheeks. In his temples there rose a curious pulsing.

After awhile she drew his gaze again imperiously, herself all unaware of this havoc she was wreaking on his temperament.

"Eighteen," he hazarded—"eighteen or possibly nineteen dining at the Pless in a ravishing dinner gown and unhappy? Oh, hardly—not she?"

Yet the impression haunted him, and ere long he was fain to seek confirmation or denial of it in the manner of her escort.

The latter sat with back to Kirkwood, cutting a figure as negative as his snug evening clothes. One could surmise little from a fleshy thick neck, a round glazed bald spot, a fringe of grizzled hair and two bright red ears.

Calendar! Somehow the fellow did suggest Kirkwood's caller of the afternoon. The young man could not have said precisely how, for he was unfamiliar with the aspect of that gentleman's back. None the less, the suggestion persisted.

By now a few of the guests, theater bound for the most part, were leaving. Here and there a table stood vacant, that had been filled, cloth tumbled, chairs disarranged, in another moment to be transformed into its pristine brilliance under the deft attentions of the waiters.

Down an aisle, past the table at which the girl was sitting, came two, walking toward the lobby, the man, a slight and meager young person, in the lead. Their party had attracted Kirkwood's notice as they entered, why, he did not remember, but it was in his mind that then they had been three. Instinctively he looked at the table they had left, one placed at some distance from the girl and hidden from her by an angle in the wall. It appeared that the third member had chosen to dally a few moments over his tobacco and a liqueur brandy. Kirkwood could see him plainly lounging in his chair and fumbling the stem of a glass, a heavy man of sordid habit, his black and sullen brows lowering and thoughtful above a face boldly handsome.

The woman of the trio was worthy of closer attention. Some paces in the wake of her lackluster escort, she was making a leisurely progress, trailing the skirts of a gown magnificent beyond dispute, half concealed though it was by the opera cloak whose soft folds draped her shoulders. Slowly, carrying her head high, she approached, insolent eyes reviewing the room from beneath their heavy lids, a metallic and mature type of dark beauty supremely self confident and self possessed.

Men turned involuntarily to look after her, not altogether in undiluted admiration.

In the act of passing behind the putative Calendar she paused momentarily, bending as if to gather up her train. Presumably the action disturbed her balance. She swayed a little and in the effort to recover rested the tips of her gloved fingers upon the edge of the table. Simultaneously (Kirkwood could have sworn) a single word left her lips, a word evidently pitched for the ear of the hypothetical Calendar alone. Then she swept on, imperturbable, assured.

To the perplexed observer it was indubitably evident that some communication had passed from the woman to the man. Kirkwood saw the fat shoulders of the girl's companion stiffen suddenly as the woman's hand rested at his elbow. As she moved away a little rippling shiver was plainly visible in the muscles of his back beneath his coat, mute token of relaxing tension. An instant later one plump and mottled hand was carelessly placed where the woman's had been, and

was at once removed with fingers closed.

To the girl, watching her face covertly, Kirkwood turned for a clue to the incident. He made no doubt that she had observed the passage. Proof of that one found in her sudden starting pallor (of indignation?) and in her eyes, briefly alight with some inscrutable emotion, though quickly veiled by lowered lashes. Slowly enough she regained color and composure, while her vis-a-vis sat motionless, head inclined, as if in thought.

Apparently the man turned in his chair to summon a waiter and exposed his profile. Kirkwood was in novice amazed to recognize Calendar—a badly frightened Calendar now, however, and hardly to be identified with the sleek, glib fellow who had interviewed Kirkwood in the afternoon. His flabby cheeks were ashen and trembling, and upon the back of his chair the fat white fingers were drumming incessantly an inaudible tattoo of shattered nerves.

"Scared silly," commented Kirkwood. "Why?"

Having spoken to his waiter, Calendar for some seconds raked the room with quick glances, as if seeking an acquaintance. Presumably disappointed, he swung back to face the girl, bending forward to reach her ears with accents low pitched and confidential. She on her part fell at once attentive, grave and responsive. Perhaps a dozen sentences passed between them. At the outset her brows contracted, and she shook her head in gentle dissent, whereupon Calendar's manner became more imperative. Gradually, unwillingly, she seemed to yield consent. Once she caught her breath sharply and, infected by her companion's agitation, sat back, color fading again in the round young cheeks.

Kirkwood's waiter put in an inopportune appearance with the bill. The young man paid it. When he looked up again Calendar had swung squarely about in his chair. His eye encountered Kirkwood's. He nodded pleasantly. Temporarily confused, Kirkwood returned the nod.

In a twinkling he had repeated. Calendar had left his chair and was wending his way through the tables toward Kirkwood's. Reaching it, he paused, offering the hand of genial fellowship. Kirkwood accepted it half heartedly (what else was he to do?), remarking at the same time that Calendar had recovered much of his composure. There was now a normal coloring in the heavily jeweled countenance, with less glint of fear in the quick, dark eyes, and Calendar's hand, even if moist and cold, no longer trembled. Furthermore, it was immediately demonstrated that his impudence had not deserted him.

"Why, Kirkwood, my dear fellow!" he cried, not so loudly as to attract attention, but in a tone assumed to divert suspicion, should he be overheard. "This is great luck, you know, to find you here."

"Is it?" returned Kirkwood coolly. He disengaged his fingers. The pink plump face was contorted in a furtive grimace of deprecation. Without waiting for permission Calendar dropped into the vacant chair.

"My dear sir," he proceeded, unabashed, "I throw myself upon your mercy."

"The devil you do?"

"I must. I'm in the denude of a hole, and there's no one I know here besides yourself. I—I—"

Kirkwood saw fit to lead him on, partly because out of the corner of his eye he was aware of the girl's unconcealed suspense. "Go on, please, Mr. Calendar. You throw yourself on a total stranger's mercy because you're in the denude of a hole, and?"

"It's this way. I'm called away on urgent business—imperative business. I must go at once. My daughter is with me—my daughter! Think of my embarrassment. I cannot leave her here alone, nor can I permit her to go home unprotected."

Calendar paused in anxiety. "That's easily remedied then," suggested Kirkwood.

"How?"

"Put her in a cab at the door."

"No. The devil! I couldn't think of it. You won't understand. I—I—"

"I do not understand," amended the younger man politely.

Calendar compressed his lips nervously. It was plain that the man was quivering with impatience and half mad with excitement. He held quiet only long enough to regain his self control and take counsel with his pride.

"It is impossible, Mr. Kirkwood. I must ask you to be generous and believe me."

"Very well. For the sake of the argument I do believe you, Mr. Calendar."

Swiftly, stammering in his haste, "I can't let Dorothy accompany me to the door," declared Calendar. "She—I—I throw myself upon your mercy!"

"What, again?"

"The truth—the truth is, if you will have it, that I am in danger of arrest the moment I leave here. If my daughter is with me she will have to endure the shame and humiliation!"

"Then why place her in such a position?" Kirkwood demanded sharply. Calendar's eyes burned, incandescent with resentment. Offended, he offered to rise and go, but changed his mind and sat tight in hope.

"I beg of you, sir!"

"One moment, Mr. Calendar."

Apparently Kirkwood's weathercock humor shifted, amusement yielding to intrigued interest. After all, why not oblige the fellow? What did anything matter now? What harm could visit him if he yielded to this corpulent adventurer's beseechings? Besides, there was the girl to be considered.

(To Be Continued)

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